

Aesthetic Hazard-Do Not Look:
A Must See
by Elizabeth Hall

There is really nothing aesthetically pleasing about Michael Betancourt's latest anti-art guerilla project aptly titled "Aesthetic Hazard". Based upon the concept of the "Caution" or "Police Line - Do Not Cross" whose three-inch bands of plastic yellow tape with black lettering function to physically quarantine and deny access to public spaces where something has happened or something dangerous is waiting to happen. Yellow barricade tapes mark off murder sites, accidents, potholes and manholes.

Last week in my apartment complex the ubiquitous yellow tape marked off the site where a woman had been thrown from the twenty-second floor of a high-rise. The tape circumvented half of an entire 1000 unit apartment complex, preventing gawkers and the media from a closer look, and apartment residents from exiting their designated parking spaces. It's not that the tape is imbued with special powers or authority. The curious and prurient could easily have surged forward into the forbidden zone. It's just we are collectively taught to obey certain codes, messages and signs, and this "aesthetic hazard" tape hijacks that response.

Michael Betancourt's Aesthetic Hazard tape anoints seemingly banal public sites in everyday locations around Miami. The type of sites that represent a visual void in our frame of vision, where nothing of particular interest is happening; the kind of sites that would fail to qualify as a landmark when giving directions.

Take **SITE 0, Location-A**, a municipal park at the corner of NE 26th St and Biscayne Blvd. A park that no one uses and is half-heartedly maintained. At this site Betancourt has installed Aesthetic Hazard-Do Not Look, as a sweeping 35 foot diagonal, stretching from around a telephone pole to the circumference of the wide Banyan Tree. **SITE 0, Location-B** can be viewed at the corner of NE Second Ave and NE 19th Street. Right in front of the bus stop which is in front of a

The installation asks me to reconsider what I value visually, and confronts me with my own need to have art function as a kind of visual stimulus, visual beauty, and that art must "behave itself" in an aesthetically pleasing format. It also raises the issue of the artists' agenda and our need, yearning or longing to be recognized. Artists by nature are yearning to secure themselves a place in history. Miami is a city that seeks to have increasing visibility in the art world: pouring millions of dollars into constructing a Performing Arts Center and redevelopment of the district immediately North of the downtown city core, and more recently, the host of The Art Basel International Art Fair.

The works are installed in overlooked, visually unimportant sections of Miami that are ironically, also the most vital culturally. It is these marginal neighborhoods and the goods, products and fashions that are consumed by their residents that the art world associates with kitsch because of their connection to the populist ideals of the mass media and the "culture industry" of Hollywood films, video games, and rap or hip-hop music. "Popular" American culture uses these ghettos as research and development for the newest mass-market trends and styles.

Miami is a place of visual limbo, where not much consideration is given to aesthetic issues within Civic spaces. Miami's real-estate development concerns itself with what happens in private buildings, areas of the city frequented by tourists and the lobby of hotels. Many areas of the city are overlooked for beautification and renewal—and the Aesthetic Hazard project maps them out.

Experimental Artists of every genre—from land artists to performance artists, have become savvy to the art market and produce marketable still photo documentation of work that would otherwise go unseen and unremembered. Like artists Richard Long, Santiago Sierra, Robert Smithson, Carol Lee Schneeman, Ana Mendieta, or Paul McCarthy, this work is visually preserved

Top Value Super Market.

This installment works semantically: the tape is installed between the signage for the bus stop and signage for a pedestrian crosswalk and also partially obscures a public service announcement for Firearm Penalties. Depending on what angle you frame your view, the words, Pull the trigger, Shoot and Kill are juxtaposed with Aesthetic Hazard-Do Not Look. The entire installation reads like one of Baudrillard's postmodern color photographs from the late 1980s where the text and the compressed composition suggest new signs and meanings in an entirely new visual sentence. One has to consider the context of the neighborhood in which Location-B was installed. The sentence warns me that the very act of looking is equated with a crime. And this reaction is a projection of my own baggage and identity as a white, educated artist who feels like she is transgressing in someone else's space in this neighborhood. My reaction to Aesthetic Hazard-Do Not Look was to read something disjointed or disturbing in my field of vision. But my question would be: what about a person from that neighborhood? What is her visual and intellectual reaction to the piece? These two installations appear as non-chalant and unimportant as the locations themselves, raising intriguing questions about the motives of high art and the agenda of artists.

At both sites, the public or neighborhood residents have chosen to leave the tape alone. The most curious aspect of Location-B is that it interferes with the public's ability to move through space, to get from the bus shelter to the crosswalk. Yet people have chosen to obey the admonishments of Aesthetic Hazard, or at least to recognize the tape, and the installation as something important, something different. The Aesthetic Hazard Project is an understated, streamlined Public and Guerilla artwork.

in the form of photographic documentation. And like these other artists, the Aesthetic Hazard Project uses a variety of formats: both 4 x 5 Chromes, digital snaps, and 35mm slides. But unlike these artists whose documentation takes the form of art objects in themselves, the documentation is even more banal than the sites themselves.

Maybe this non-aesthetic comes from Betancourt's assertion that he is more of a theorist who has an experimental practice, than an artist who's interested in theory. Betancourt's interest is in the process. Like how long will the tape remain up? Will anyone disturb the tape? Will anyone in the local community even notice it? How many pictures will it take to document the project? And how many sites/location will it take to complete it? We don't know and he's not saying. That is one way the project is experimental.

This project is ambiguous. The yellow tape reads: "AESTHETIC HAZARD-DO NOT LOOK". What is aesthetic? Where is the HAZARD? The entire cityscape is a potential candidate. Next stop? More installments are scheduled for Miami and will run the gamut from the neglected inner city and rural outposts to places of high culture and dense tourism.

For info: www.aestheticahazard.info.

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